

Political Unionism

Ever since the 1940's, trade unions in the Caribbean unions have established a close relationship with traditional political parties. This came about as trade union leaders of that era sought to create alliances with political interest in their quest to fight social injustices. As was the case in the then British Guiana, there was a marriage of convenience where the Guiana Industrial Workers Union which was founded in 1946, joined forces with the Peoples Progressive Party which came into existence in 1950, to contest the 1953 general elections in that country.

The experience in Jamaica saw the National Workers Union being formed by the Jamaica's Peoples National Party. In Barbados the experience was somewhat different as the Barbados Progressive League combined as both a political party and trade union.

The promotion of political unionsm has been advantageous to labour unions in that it has contributed to both advocacy and political action. As a direct outcome, there has been improvements in the working conditions of workers. The social platform agenda and the economic wellbeing of the people and the nation have been high on the agenda in the collaboration that has initiated between labour and the political interests. Labour would consider that it has benefitted by way of having a louder voice in the airing of its concerns, and through the lobby process, influence the bringing about of changes at the national, regional and international levels.

The influencing of the introduction of new and progressive labour legislation has been evident across the regional. The thrust in this direction has been driven by the various conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) which labour unions have encouraged or pressured national governments to ratify.

On the surface, it would appear that political unionism is an ideal arrangement that enhances national governance. It would be idealistic to think that this arrangement would be one of comfort in satisfying the needs of labour and political interests. The drawback is identified by Jan Techau (Berlin Policy Journal, July 13, 2015), who wrote:

“In politics, sovereignty bargains mean surrendering core state powers. And the usefulness of the outcome does little to establish legitimacy – in the political realm, legitimacy is created through input, i.e. the participation of the voters, the actual sovereign.”

The compromising of political power will most certainly prove to be a problem, as it is highly unlikely that any political party and more so one that constitutes the government of the day will concede on it power, authority and it is right to exercise control.

Caribbean trade union can only but learn from their own experiences, and should think carefully of entering into convenient arrangements that in the short and long term prove to be more damaging than anticipated. Take for example the situation in Trinidad and Tobago, where under the People National Congress government led by Kamal Persad Bissessar (2010-2015), trade unions joined with other political interest to form a coalition government. History will recall that as the arrangement fell apart, trade unions and joined forces with the joined with the opposition People National Movement (PNC) to move their agenda forward.

The article coming out of Trinidad, headlined 'Trade unions Plot 'hurricane' protest, written by Verne Burnett, Tuesday, July 11, 2017 tell the said tale of political unions going wrong. The article in part reads:

"Three of the country's major labour federations are threatening a hurricane of a protest on August 4th against bad governance and the retrenchment of workers. "Bret is joke, we will take this country by storm. It's time to shake up this blasted place and let those who took the job to govern, govern properly."

"The people of Arima are no different from the people in Port of Spain, and San Fernando and Sangre Grande, Mayaro and throughout the country because anywhere you go the people are disenchanted, dissatisfied and they are suffering and we believe that the only true body that can speak truly on behalf of the people and can bring some measure of relief." In fact, Roget said that it was probably because the trade unions had not been active enough that there had been such a display of bad governance manifested in disrespect for workers and the trade union movement. In response to a question, Roget said the "tripartite conversation" has failed."

"Are they committed to tripartism and the body that is responsible for that failed to excite and to ignite the type of discussion to really get things going. You would imagine that in this period more than any other period that is required but the Government failed. As a matter of fact while we were discussing, Government and employers were sending workers home."

“You would recall the Tourism Development Corporation (TDC) workers among others, so how could we be in discussion discussing how should we share the burden of adjustment and at the same time the Government, who is one of the tripartite partners in that arrangement, they are sending workers home. And that is wrong and we said that we will withdraw ourself until you halt that and then we will come back to the table because we are all equals.” Among other things, the August 4th protest will demand an end to mass retrenchment; sustainable jobs; the settlement of outstanding negotiations; increased minimum wage; timely payment of pension and gratuity to Police; teachers; public sector workers; the end to contract labour and support for local farmers.”

The moral of this story is for trade unions leaders to think before they act.